

COMPUTERS/HILLEL SEGAL

Can't warm up to NEC's lap-top

You have to hand it to the Japanese. They have a knack for copying American products then offering them with improved features at a lower price. And to top it off, they hire the best Madison Avenue advertising agencies to promote their wares in North America.

This is particularly evident in the personal computer market, and most recently in the "lap-top" computer market. The so-called lap-tops are small, battery-operated PCs that recently have become popular with executives and salesmen who want to bring a computer home in the evenings or with them to see clients. Because the machines are IBM PC compatible, it's easy to run the same programs that are installed on your office computers, and to simply transfer floppy disks back and forth between machines.

But sometimes the Japanese miss the mark, as I think NEC did

with its lap-top called the "MultiSpeed." Weighing about 12 pounds, it's slightly larger than most competitive machines — about the size of a small briefcase — and sports an unusually fast processor chip. For memory intensive processing — tasks not slowed down by disk

accesses or printing — it runs about twice as fast as a normal PC and almost identical to an IBM AT. The name MultiSpeed refers to the fact that its speed is actually selectable, since some programs can't run at the faster speed, you can always revert to the slower setting. It comes standard with 640 kilobytes

of memory and two 720K, 3½-inch floppy disk drives.

On the face of it, the machine is a winner. It's fast, pretty, IBM PC compatible, and loaded with extra features like a built-in modem and communications software for sending or receiving data over tele-

phone lines.

Yet, after testing, the machine proved disappointing. Here's why:

✓ A terrible, terrible LCD screen. I once thought that the screen on the Data General One, Model 2 lap-top was the worst, but this one takes the cake. It's barely usable for a half hour at a time. It comes with a monitor port that allows you to plug in an external monitor, but this defeats the purpose of buying a lap-top for travel.

✓ An oddly arranged keyboard. Not only did the NEC engineers decide to move around all the non-alphanumeric keys, but the return and shift keys are positioned so you'll miss them every time. Perhaps IBM has the clout to get away with such irrational actions, but not NEC.

✓ Absence of a hard disk. At a time when the other lap-top manufacturers are adding hard disks to their machines, this one is still only available with 3½-inch floppies. And since so much normal business processing requires frequent disk accesses, this slows down the

machine considerably. Its perceived speed is much slower than other lap-tops with hard disks, regardless of the faster processor.

✓ Finally, compared with its competitors, the MultiSpeed is too expensive. With a list price of \$2,195, it's hundreds of dollars more than lap-tops from Toshiba and Datavue, and more than \$1,000 more than Tandy's lap-tops. True, the others are not as fast, but they're still IBM PC compatible, and some even include hard disks for a lower price.

The bottom line: This is one Japanese clone that still needs improvement. Its one attractive feature, fast processor speed, is offset by slow floppy disks; and the screen is miserable. In short, you'll "multi-miss" if you buy the MultiSpeed.

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